How do word-related variables and proficiency influence young learners' contextual L2 word learning?

Lexical proficiency entails many layers of knowledge and a distinction is often made between the breadth and the depth of vocabulary knowledge as acquiring full knowledge of a word is a gradual process. Research has shown that looking into different characteristics of vocabulary items can help us to better understand the process of vocabulary acquisition (Crossley, Salsbury, McNamara and Jarvis, 2011). In this presentation we will discuss which word-related variables play a role in Dutch-speaking children's L2 word learning through out-of-school exposure prior to classroom instruction in the foreign language.

Several studies (Lefever, 2010; De Wilde, Brysbaert & Eyckmans, 2019; Puimège & Peters, 2019) have shown that this kind of contextual language learning can lead to large language gains but have also shown considerable individual differences between language learners. Therefore, the second aim of this study is an investigation into how the role of the different word-related characteristics varies according to the learners' proficiency.

In this study, 780 Dutch-speaking 11-year-olds' receptive vocabulary knowledge was charted with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Different measures were used to investigate the role of frequency, concreteness, cognateness, and age of acquisition in receptive vocabulary learning. The data were analyzed using generalized linear mixed modelling.

The results show that cognateness and L1 age of acquisition are important predictors for receptive word knowledge for all the children. The findings confirm the importance of cognates in vocabulary learning and show that less proficient learners tend to guess the meaning of words based on their L1. The results also show significant interactions between proficiency and cognateness, frequency, age of acquisition and concreteness, indicating that more proficient children's L2 learning is influenced by L2-related variables such as L2 word frequency. This shows that word-related variables contribute in different ways according to learners' proficiency levels.